

Milestones



Bennett's long-running *A Chorus Line*: as in the newly revived *Dreamgirls*, a gift for telling a story through exhilarating stagecraft

Broadway's Gypsy Genius

Michael Bennett: 1943-1987

The author of a play is indisputably the playwright. The "author" of a musical—the person who conceives the story and the way of telling it—may be the composer, lyricist, librettist, producer, director or even choreographer. The end result is always to a degree collaborative, but some single creator usually gives a show its characteristic look, sound and momentum. That is why the revival of *Dreamgirls*, which culminated a national tour by opening on Broadway last week, is labeled "the Michael Bennett production," although Bennett was not credited with the book, score or lyrics. Like *A Chorus Line*, now in its twelfth year, Broadway's longest run ever, *Dreamgirls* owes its existence to Bennett the director—his visual inventiveness, sophisticated simplicity and gift for making stories of show-biz success and failure seem like paradigms of everyone's struggles in life, as they were in his own. He called himself "a tap dancer from Buffalo who went all



The director in 1983

the way." When he died of AIDS last week at 44, having both his signature shows on Broadway seemed an apt memorial.

Born Michael Bennett Di Figlia in Buffalo, the son of an automobile-plant machinist and a secretary, he said he never wanted any life but the theater. At 16 he dropped out of high school to tour Europe in the chorus of *West Side Story*, and two years later he made his Broadway debut, dancing in *Subways Are for Sleeping*. At 23 his choreography for *A Joyful Noise* (1966) won the first of his 17 Tony nominations. Then came a phenomenal five-year run: choreography for *Promises, Promises* (1968), *Coco* (1969), *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971), which also saw his debut as a co-director with Harold Prince, followed by *Twigs* (1972), his first solo directing, and *Seesaw* (1973), his first stint as a show doctor rescuing an incipient flop.

Still a dance-corps gypsy at heart, Bennett used actual taped recollections by

dancers to shape the quiet, brooding, confessional monologues of the Pulitzer-prizewinning *A Chorus Line* (1975). His show-biz saga inverted the cliché: these hoofers were not destined to become stars, they were just trying to pursue a craft for as long as their bodies would allow. The anthem *What I Did for Love* was not sung about a sentimental interlude but about the gritty romance of dancing.

The exhilarating *Dreamgirls* (1981) inspired much of today's high-tech stagecraft. Like Prince, Bennett mastered the use of sets, lights and even costumes to propel the plot and debunked the wisdom that emotional high spots must be framed by lulls. *Dreamgirls* hyperkinetically recounts a black girl group's crossover into the pop mainstream at the figurative and sometimes literal cost of the soul of most of the participants. It asserts that when white youths came to accept black music as "their" music, the cause of integration gained tremendously. Yet the heroes are performers who refuse to compromise their ethnic integrity. The aria of thwarted love *And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going* and the haunted ballad *One Night Only* both end with a startling, almost cinematic intrusion of the girl group performing Las Vegas kitsch. One measure of Bennett's lasting genius is that the trick, like the show, works just as well the second time around. —By William A. Henry III

BORN. To Vanessa Williams, 24, the first black Miss America (1984), who resigned her title after *Penthouse* published photos of her in the nude, and her husband Ramon Hervey, manager of her acting and singing career: their first child, a daughter; in Los Angeles. Name: Melanie Lynne. Weight: 8 lbs. ½ oz.

MARRIAGE REVEALED. Johnny Carson, 61, nimble-witted king of late-night television; and Alexis Maas, thirtyish, a former Los Angeles brokerage-firm employee and his companion of the past four years; he for the fourth time, she for the first; on June 20; in Malibu Beach, Calif.

INDICTED. Lyndon LaRouche, 64, presidential candidate of an extremist political group; on charges of obstructing a federal

grand jury investigating his 1984 campaign finances; in Boston. The indictment formally linked LaRouche to 13 of his followers who have been charged in a \$1 million credit-card scam with milking the accounts of some 2,000 unsuspecting supporters. LaRouche, who has denied the allegation, could face five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

AILING. Jean-Pierre Rampal, 65, lyrical French flutist; from severe bronchitis and the flu; in Sagone, Corsica. Rampal has canceled all his July engagements.

DIED. Karl Linna, 67, Estonian immigrant to the U.S. who after a bitter eight-year court battle was deported from New York City last April to face a Soviet firing squad for Nazi war crimes; of heart, liver and

kidney disease; in Leningrad. Convicted in absentia by the U.S.S.R. in 1962 for running a concentration camp in Estonia, Linna was stripped of his American citizenship in 1981.

DIED. F. Donald Nixon, 72, feckless entrepreneur whose business dealings embarrassed his elder brother Richard during the 1960 presidential campaign; of cancer; in Newport Beach, Calif. In 1960, Richard Nixon's campaign was jolted by reports that the candidate's brother had received a \$205,000 loan from Industrialist Howard Hughes in a futile attempt to save a chain of restaurants specializing in Nixonburger beef patties. After Richard Nixon was elected President in 1968, he ordered a wiretap on his brother to preclude further troublesome occurrences.